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Australia's New Independence Means Greater Trouble With Its Old Allies

By Raymond Bonner

CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA

Isolated geographically, this island nation may now find itself growing isolated politically because of foreign-policy quarrels with two of its major allies, the United States and France.

After Australia's foreign minister expressed strong support for a ban on all nuclear testing, the Reagan Administration sent a formal protest note, followed with some unkind words about the foreign minister himself. While that rupture was brewing, French President Francois Mitterrand excoriated the Australians for their historical mistreatment of the country's Aborigines. His petulance was sparked by the Australian government's support of the anti-French separatist movement in New Caledonia.

Australia's relations with the United States, particularly the issue of arms control, will lead the agenda when Australia's prime minister, Robert Hawke, visits Washington on Feb. 7, Hawke has said.

Canberra's imbroglio with Washington began when Foreign Minister Bill Hayden announced at a Geneva press conference last year that unless the United States moved forcefully toward an arms-control agreement, the Australians would review the status of U.S. bases in Australia. Little is known about the United States military activity here because it is carried out under strictest security measures. But the United States has a critical electronic eavesdropping station at Pine Gap, in the central desert region. In addition, Australia allows U.S. B-52 strategic bombers to train over its vast, sparsely populated territory.

The U.S. bases have acquired heightened significance since the Labor government in New Zealand, which replaced a conservative government last year, banned U.S. ships carrying nuclear weapons from using its ports. The Reagan Administration has responded by suggesting to the Australians that it might cut off New Zealand from access to all U.S. intelligence. Because the three countries are members of the mutual defense pact ANZUS, this threat is viewed here as asking the Australians to "heavy" New Zealand into changing its policy.

The Administration's response to Hayden was a demarche, an official but low level diplomatic protest. In addition to being resented as an impingement on Australia's foreign policy, it is seen as interference in domestic politics. That is a concern taken seriously here, particularly because of charges that the CIA was involved in the downfall of Gough Whitlam's left-leaning government in 1975.

The State Department's demarche was sent not to the Foreign Ministry, as would normally be the case, but directly to the prime minister. "This was a deliberate, clumsy attempt to make relations awkward between Hawke, who believes to an absurd degree in the sanctity of the U.S. relationship, and Mr. Hayden, who if anything underestimates its value both to Australia and the United States," wrote a highly respected columnist for the Sydney Morning Herald, Peter Hastings.

Hayden was ousted by Hawke as leader of the Labor Party in 1983, and the perception among political observers here is that the Reagan Administration would like Hawke to remove him as foreign minister. Hayden is far more leftist than Hawke. The 52-year-old Hawke was expected to be a left-wing leader. He is a former head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, a powerful coalition in a country where 60% of the work force is unionized. But as prime minister, Hawke has disappointed many of his unionist backers, while earning kudos from the business community.

The Reagan Administration turned the ratchet of tensions between the two countries another notch a couple of weeks after the demarche when a U.S. official in Washington said of Hayden, "He has drained the well of good will completely dry." The official added that Hayden "has no respect or influence here anymore."

The attack on Hayden was the lead story in the Australian, a major newspaper, and editorials and commentary in other papers followed. The U.S. Embassy sought to quell the controversy, saying that the harsh criticisms, made anonymously, "do not reflect the views of the United States government."

If U.S.-Australia relations are dependent on the outcome of the arms-control talks, French-Australian relations will undoubtedly parallel developments in New Caledonia, where the native, but minority, Melanesian population is seeking independence from France. The Australians generally view what is happening on the island, 750 miles to the east, as an independence movement, unrelated to international communism or East-West geopolitics, as it has frequently been portrayed in the United States.

The Australian government infuriated France when Hayden referred to France's control of New Caledonia as "one of the last vestiges of colonialism in the South Pacific." Mitterrand responded with a comment about Australia's treatment of its minority, the Aborigines. "In fact if there are still some Aborigines it is because they have not been killed," he charged.

"Foul!" cried the Sydney Morning Herald in an editorial. Without defending the foreign minister's remark, the paper noted that while the Australians had come "something close to genocide in respect of the Aborigines a century ago, in the last 20 years it has made increasing and genuine efforts to redress the balance." By contrast, the paper charged, France in the last century "succeeded in halving" the New Caledonia's Melanesian population "through a contemptuous disregard for . . . health, culture and land rights."

Australia, which did not become independent until this century and is still part of the British Commonwealth, scrupulously followed the crown's foreign policy until the 1960s. Then came a period when its foreign policy mirrored that of the United States, including sending troops to Vietnam. Now that Australia is searching for its own course, it is finding that striking out on its own is often problematic.

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